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Exploring the teaching of divided histories in conflict-affected societies: Sharing experiences and learning between Northern Ireland and Lebanon

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Introduction/Context

Lebanon and Northern Ireland (NI) are conflict-affected societies and despite being at different stages of the peacebuilding process, both settings continue to deal with competing religious ideologies, different political narratives, legacy issues of conflict, and opposing views of history and citizenship, all of which coalesce to challenge societal stability and sustainability. In both contexts, education is seen as a mechanism for tackling division and promoting reconciliation, but teaching history and citizenship in schools can be controversial, both in the way that students engage with lessons, the capacity of teachers to deliver them, and the fact that there may be disagreement over historical narratives. At a broader level, history and citizenship pedagogy in conflict-affected contexts can have implications for social cohesion. For example, teaching history in Lebanon has become both an expression of conflict and its perpetuation. Attempts to agree a national history curriculum have been met with frequent opposition. In 1989, the Lebanese peace agreement included a clause prioritising a review of national curricula. History education is the only subject that has not successfully passed curricular reforms.

This paper will report on the design, delivery and findings of a Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) intervention involving a series of practitioner workshops in both Lebanon (Notre Dame University-Louaize [NDU]) and NI (Queen’s University Belfast [QUB]), with the intention of supporting the formulation and implementation of curricula tackling the legacy of conflict, and learning from cross-national comparisons.

Intervention / Workshops

The main objectives of the workshops were to initiate a network of high-impact history/citizenship teachers and relevant stakeholders, creating a sustainable space for support among teachers in conflict-affected societies; and to explore innovations in teaching sensitive histories that could inform theories of change for grassroots approaches to curriculum development in conflict-affected contexts. A parallel aim was to explore opportunities for cooperation and professional exchange around school networks and collaboration (based on the model of Shared Education developed in NI), with a view to promoting sustainability of public education in Lebanon and better access to quality education (through the professional development of teachers) for young people from lower socio-economic groups within conflict-affected societies/ODA listed countries.

This activity is underpinned by a conceptual framework based on the work of Stenhouse (1975), which focuses on curriculum development through empowering teachers as agents of change.

We brought together a select group of high-impact post-primary history/citizenship teachers, recruited from both NI (n=6) and Lebanon (n=6) to participate in a series of workshops—held at NDU and QUB, respectively. In each jurisdiction we held 3 days of workshops involving: comparing approaches to teaching history, civics and controversial issues, school visits and cross-jurisdiction teacher collaboration where teachers designed lessons together to be tried in classrooms with the aims of sustaining the collaboration between teachers over an academic year.

NI teachers were representative of Maintained (Catholic) and Controlled (*de facto* Protestant) sectors, and primarily all-ability secondary schools; Lebanese participants were primarily from state/public schools and two from private schools. Teachers were selected based on their proven record of taking initiative to reimagine the curriculum and engage learners in critical pedagogies. Participants in NI were also recruited based on their experience of Shared Education and delivering shared classes for history, citizenship, or other relevant subjects.

Participants were encouraged to reflect critically on some of the existing models for developing history curricula in conflict-affected societies, active learning focusing on conflict, displacement, and human rights violations as informed by theory and practice. They were also tasked to develop new tools and activities, in pairs, which they would test/attempt in their classrooms before the second series of workshops in NI. This began a process of advancing approaches to subject-specific knowledge and encourage engagement with sensitive inquiries.

Impact

Measuring the impact of this intervention is an ongoing process, with further workshops planned in February 2019. Participants from both Lebanon and NI delegations will feedback their experiences and report on the delivery of their new tools and activities, developed in pairs. They will be tasked to identify synergies, consider shared practice models of teaching, and record their ideas for growing/maintaining the network.

Some of our initial findings highlight the differences between both contexts, including policy, practice, and how professional development is approached at different levels of the system.

Discussion

The main contribution of this paper is the advancement of a theory of change that emphasizes teachers as agents of curricular change, by exchanging practices and exercising critical self-reflection as an integral component of professional development.

Additionally, whilst the challenges of conflict are ubiquitous, in reality, they typically require local solutions – we will discuss how collaboration and school networks can offer alternative models for addressing these challenges, alongside the perspectives of participants involved in our workshops.

Presenting at CIES will assist in the further development of this project in terms of broadening its reach and offering advice on how to include additional ODA list countries.

Relevance

This project was explicitly a cross-national initiative involving collaboration between academics from QUB (NI) and NDU (Lebanon). From the outset, comparisons between the education systems in both contexts were central to the project's rationale and the different perspectives this offered provided the opportunity for learning and exchange.

The workshops enabled practitioners from different international contexts to explore approaches to pedagogy, share expertise and resources, and focus on the different ways that curricula are implemented in conflict-affected contexts to promote transformative change, with the intention of having a positive impact on societal cohesion.

Furthermore, our project sought to contribute towards targets for *UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, on Education*. Project outcomes were also framed by the *Lebanon Ministry of Education, RACE II strategy*, seeking to support approaches that address the challenges of stability and quality of provision. RACE focuses upon building the capacity of the overstretched state/public school system, in which a huge influx of displaced students have been enrolled. Displaced students in Lebanon find access to affordable/free education challenging—with a minority having formal places in 2016/17. Participants discussed the potential of school collaboration between state and private schools as a vehicle for addressing such inequalities.